

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

October 27, 2010

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom (USCIRF) on Monday sent the following letter to Secretary Clinton expressing its concerns on the lack of progress in Abyei.

October 25, 2010

The Honorable Hillary Rodham Clinton
Secretary of State
U.S. Department of State
Washington, DC 20520

Dear Madam Secretary:

We at the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom are increasingly alarmed by the lack of progress in the volatile Abyei area of Sudan. As you are aware, the January 9, 2011 referendum in Abyei will determine whether the area is to be part of the North or the South. Unfortunately, referendum preparations are severely behind schedule, leading to concerns of not only a delayed vote, but of renewed conflict. Increased, senior-level U.S attention is urgently needed.

We understand that earlier this month Special Envoy Gration led negotiations between the two parties to the Comprehensive Peace Agreement (CPA) to resolve the impasse over formation of the Abyei Referendum Commission. Unfortunately, those differences remain. Until members of the Commission are appointed, preparations for the vote cannot begin. Of

particular importance is defining who is a resident of the Abyei area and therefore allowed to vote. The United States must ensure that the parties continue to abide by and advance these provisions in Abyei Protocol in the CPA. There are currently several worrying signs as to future peace in the area, including reports of recent incursions by Northern forces into the area.

Given the volatility of the area, and the strong possibility that violence in Abyei could spread and impact North-South peace, the United States must increase its diplomatic activities to address this potential conflict. We welcomed the appointment of Ambassador Lyman to the Sudan Programs Office to focus solely on the referendum and post-2011 negotiations. In that same vein, USCIRF urges the immediate dispatch of a senior diplomat to Sudan to work with the SPLM and NCP to establish an Abyei Referendum Commission, resolve the dispute over Abyei residency and eligibility of voters, and ensure that preparations for the poll immediately follow.

We cannot stress the importance, Madam Secretary, of reinforcing the proper and originally intended meaning of the Abyei provisions of the CPA. As you may recall, it was the United States, through Special Envoy for Peace in Sudan John Danforth, who laid down the original terms, and, with a very firm hand, succeeded in getting North and South to agree. The North is now trying to change the meaning of those terms, and it is incumbent upon the United States to re-assert what the Abyei provisions of the CPA require. Having someone undertake this particular task who both North and South will respect--Senator Danforth or former Secretary Colin Powell, for example--will be important. And, based on our recent meeting with Government of Southern Sudan President Salva Kiir in Juba, we believe this approach could lead to progress.

Given the history of conflict in Abyei, including violence in May 2008 which left more than 50,000 displaced, the probability of more violence, should there be failure to resolve the Abyei referendum, is incredibly high. Time is running short; the situation therefore demands

increased, sustained, and high-level U.S. attention.

In closing, I thought it might be helpful to pass along two other observations from our recent trip to Juba. We heard from several sources that Abyei residents are increasingly suspicious of and dissatisfied with the peacekeeping force, which consists predominantly of Muslims from Egypt. Rightly or wrongly, the perception is that these forces tend to ignore violence perpetrated by the Misseriya. If there were some way of balancing out the composition of the force, this might help to alleviate some of the tensions in Abyei.

Our second observation pertains to the post-2011 negotiations. For the first time, we heard President Kiir and Vice President Machar express serious concerns about the fate of the displaced Southern Christians living in camps outside Khartoum in the event of secession by the South. The United States should make the safety, well-being, and self-determination of these displaced persons an important part of our post-referendum discussions with the North.

Sincerely,

Leonard Leo

CC: J. Scott Gration, U.S. Special Envoy to Sudan
Johnnie Carson, Assistant Secretary of State for African Affairs

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Commissioners are appointed by the President and the leadership of both political parties in the Senate and the House of Representatives. USCIRF's principal responsibilities are to review the facts and circumstances of violations of religious freedom internationally and to make policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and Congress.

To interview a USCIRF Commissioner, contact Tom Carter, Communications Director at tcarter@uscirf.go, or (202) 523-3257